

JOSEPH BABINSKI IN THE COMPETITIVE
EXAMINATION (*AGRÉGATION*) OF 1892

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THE intrigues of politics have their counterparts in academic life. The competitive examination (*agrégation*) in medicine in which Joseph Babinski participated is noteworthy in that it brought into sharp focus existing rivalries at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and the effect of these on academic advancement.

The examination originated during the French Restoration and the return of the Bourbons to power. At this time academic careers depended on politics. In 1822, after rioting by students at the University of Paris, the medical school was closed for four months.¹ Liberal professors and Bonapartists were forced into retirement.

The medical faculty was then reorganized and expanded from 12 to 23 professors. To form a cadre of potential teachers, the position of *professeur agrégé* was created, corresponding to the position of assistant or associate professor. Thirty-six *agrégés* were selected by examination. Twenty-four of these were engaged in teaching; the remainder waited three years before assuming pedagogic obligations.

Then as now, such positions were viewed as the pinnacle of medical academic achievement and many aspired to achieve these appointments. The *agrégés* were grouped into three classes: *stagiaires*, the 12 of the 36 who served for three years as *agrégés* without rights, teaching obligations, or salary; *agrégés en exercice*, who for six years assisted professors in teaching and were remunerated for their services; and *agrégés libres*, who at the end of the nine-year period were taken off salary unless they could secure election to a faculty professorship.²

The *agrégés* were never entitled to laboratory space or research equipment. In effect they were able to use a lecture hall and little else. Their limited tenure and the fact that their assignments were governed by the Minister of Public Assistance made departmental planning difficult in the clinical units of numerous hospitals in Paris.

Like the competitions for extern, intern, physician, or surgeon of the hospitals, the *agrégation* examination was public and open to any French physician. Those who competed in medicine were expected to reply to a wide variety of questions in general medicine, legal medicine, and pathology. The competitions were held in Paris every three years and there were many candidates for few positions. Other areas in which candidates competed were surgery, obstetrics, and biological sciences.

All the candidates must have been aware of the political realities of this competition and of the support that they needed from their teachers and other influential persons in the medical community. It was difficult to envision a successful competitor without such support.

Jean-Martin Charcot himself had failed in his first competition, in 1857. Four years later he would not have passed his second examination without the support of Pierre Rayer, a member of the jury. Rayer strongly supported Charcot's performance and Charcot was then successful.³

In later years Charcot used his influence to advance his own students. One of these was Charles Bouchard, described by Georges Guilain as the only pupil of Charcot ever to break with him.³ Bouchard had attended medical school in Lyon; while an intern there he had published his researches on pellagra.⁴ He was 10 years younger than Charcot when he became Charcot's intern. Together they described intracranial hemorrhage secondary to military aneurysm (1868). With Charcot's support Bouchard advanced rapidly. In 1869 he was *agrégé*, in the next year, *médecin*. Ten years later he assumed the Chair of Pathology and General Therapeutics at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris; this he held until his death in 1915. In 1887 he was elected to the Academy of Medicine and Sciences, filling the seat of Paul Bert, who had died in Hanoi.⁵

Two years before the competition of 1892, Bouchard, who had achieved a national reputation, was sent by the head of the University of Paris, Leon Bourgeois, to represent France at the Congress of Medicine in Berlin. This was an especially sensitive assignment, since the enmities of the Franco-Prussian War still existed. At that meeting in Berlin, Bouchard's paper was "The Question of Immunity."⁴

Proud, cold, learned, and ambitious, Bouchard achieved the fame he desired. He was successful in establishing a vigorous and productive

TABLE I. CANDIDATES IN MEDICINE, *AGRÉGATION* OF 1892 (PARIS)*

C. Achard (Debove)†‡	J.-B.-A. Marfan (Lesègue and Peter)**
J. Babinski (Charcot)‡	P. E. Menetrier (Bouchard)**
A. Brault (Cornil)‡	H. Richardière‡
A. Charrin (Bouchard)**	G. H. Roger (Bouchard)**
P. Duflocq	G. Thibierge
P.-L.-E. Gaucher (Bouchard)**	L. H. Thoinot†
Gilles de la Tourette (Charcot)†	F. Widal†
A. Lesage	R. Wurtz (Strauss)†‡

*Source: Le concours d'agrégation de médecine de 1892. *Prog. Méd.* (2d Ser.) 15: 26, 1892.

**Successful candidates in 1892.

†Successful candidates in 1895.

‡Officially protested results of 1892 competition.

Note: The names of the respective chiefs are in parentheses.

school of his own. His research dealt with alterations in body chemistry induced by bacterial toxins. He was the first to introduce bacteriology into the medical curriculum in Paris.⁴

As he became more powerful, he became less sensitive to the wishes of his former teacher and to those candidates whom Charcot favored in academic competitions. In these final years of his life, Charcot had dispensed with his work in neuropathology and had devoted himself to studies on hysteria. According to Guillaín, Bouchard took Charcot's work lightly and on occasion ridiculed it. Perhaps he considered Charcot's activities deficient in the techniques of the basic science that he himself used. Bouchard's students are said to have informed their teacher that Charcot regarded their mentor as one who exhibited "excessive pretensions in chemistry and bacteriology."³

Nevertheless the *agrégation*, if secured, assured academic recognition and prominence. The position guaranteed a degree of financial support and tenure for at least nine years. Joseph Babinski and Gilles de la Tourette, a former student of Charcot, entered the competition (Table I). Bouchard, one of Charcot's most distinguished pupils and now his rival, was appointed president of the jury. The list of the candidates shown in the table includes only competitors for positions at universities in Paris,⁶ although others competed for posts in Lyon, Nancy, and Toulouse at this time.

Babinski, the son of Polish refugees, was born in Paris and, after

early schooling there, decided on a medical career. After his externship in 1887 he spent part of his internship with Victor Cornil at La Pitié and an additional year with Alfred Vulpian. His thesis for the medical degree (1885) dealt with multiple sclerosis.⁷ Because of Babinski's strong performance as intern, Alix Joffroy recommended him to Charcot. During this time Babinski and Henri Richardière were competing for the prize of the internship and the gold medal. The winner of the gold medal became eligible for an additional year of internship. At the same time Charcot had available the position of *Chef de Clinique* at the Salpêtrière. It was decided that this post would be offered to the loser in the competition for internship. Since Richardière won the competition for the medal, Babinski was offered the appointment at the Salpêtrière and he accepted it.⁸ Five years later, in 1890, when he was 32 years old, he competed successfully for the rank of *médecin* of the hospitals of Paris.

Charcot, keenly aware of Babinski's talents, considered him highly suited for a productive career in academic medicine and encouraged him to participate in the *agrégation*.

In previous years the medical press had called attention to the faults of this examination and to the candidates' need for a sympathetic jury. The progress of the competition was followed with varying degrees of interest by the medical journals, some of which were partisan and biased.

The examination began in January with an episode which, in retrospect, was the cause of much concern. A few hours before the competition was scheduled to begin, Germain Sée, a member of the jury and professor of therapeutics at the Hôtel Dieu, informed the president of the jury that he was ill and would be unable to attend the first meeting. Bouchard was required by law to ballot among the alternate judges in attendance and elect a replacement. Instead, he suggested to the judges present that a postponement was suitable. This being accepted, the examination did not begin until the next day. The alleged breach of protocol was noted promptly in the partisan *Progrès Médical* and comment was made about the lively discussions held on the subject by various hospital services.⁶ Sée then appeared and attended the competition for three days; after this his illness forced him to withdraw for the remainder of the examination period. Bouchard did not replace him and, of the nine possible jury votes, he was then entitled to his own

TABLE II. INTERNS AND STAFF OF CHARCOT

V. Cornil	1863	P. Blocq	1887
C.-J. Bouchard	1864, 1866	E. Huet	1888
D.-M. Bourneville	1868	A. Dutil	1889
A. Gombault	1871	E. Parmentier	1890
G. M. Debove	1871	A. Souques	1890
A. Pierret	1874	J.-B. Charcot	1891
F. Raymond	1875	G. Gasne	1892
H. Pitres	1876	H. Lamy	1892
P. Oulmont	1877	P. Londe	1893
P. Richer	1878	P. Collinet	1894
E. Brissaud	1879	L. Landowski	1895
G. Ballet	1880		
C. Féré	1881	<i>Chefs des Services Auxiliaires</i>	
P. Marie	1882	R. Vigouroux	Electrotherapy
Gilles de la Tourette	1884	H. Parinaud	Ophthalmology
G. Guinon	1885	M. Gellé	Otology
J. Babinski, <i>Chef de Clinique</i>	1885	L. M. V. Galippe	Otology
P. Berbez	1886	A. Londe	Photography

Guest list of those who attended a banquet in honor of Charcot. (Source: Banquet offert à M. le Pr Charcot. *Prog. Méd.* [2d Ser.] 15:208, 1892.)

The years indicate when each served as Charcot's intern. Collinet and Landowski were to serve future internships with Charcot.

plus that of Sée. Before the examination started, the candidates had the option of challenging the jury regarding replacement of the juror but they failed to do so.⁹

Although rivalries existed among powerful figures concerned with the competition, an apparent air of friendship and conciliation was evident at the banquet that Charcot's former interns held for him during the *agrégation* (Table II). The celebration was held in honor of Charcot, who had become a commander of the Legion of Honor. Judges as well as some of the candidates were present at this meeting. Cornil, Charcot's first intern, lauded his teacher, signaling his contributions and those of the school at the Salpêtrière. In his response to the tributes, Charcot referred to Bouchard as a close colleague, acknowledged the prosperous school he had founded, and cited his powerful original work and his contribution to the brilliance of French medicine.¹⁰

When the results of the competition became known, it was observed that for the positions in Paris three of the five successful candidates (Albert Charrin, Philippe Gaucher, and Pierre Eugène Menetrier) were students of Bouchard. The fourth was Georges Henri Roger, who,

although not of Bouchard's school, had served as chief of his laboratory. Only the fifth, Jean Bernard Antoine Marfan, had no prior academic link with the president of the jury.¹¹ None of the candidates supported by Charcot or his school were elected. In previous competitions it had been customary for unsuccessful candidates to voice their dissatisfactions. This time, however, in an action unprecedented in the history of the *agrégation*, five of the unsuccessful candidates, (Charles Achard, Albert Brault, Babinski, Richardière, and Robert Wurtz) petitioned Leon Bourgeois, Minister of Public Assistance, for an annulment of the competition.¹² Their petition was based on the postponement of the examination at the time of Sée's absence and on the failure of the president to replace him. Their case was supported by *Progrès Médical*, which pointed out that the competitions had been marred by trouble and by rumors of dinners devoted to plotting and bargaining among the judges and exchanges of support for various candidates, often contingent on promises of decorations.¹³

The postponement, awaiting Sée's return, was explained as a courtesy to a sick colleague. Bourneville, editor of the *Progrès Médical*, considered the delay a maneuver calculated to maintain on the jury a man who could be manipulated by its president.⁹ The fact that the president of the jury was appointed by the Minister of Public Assistance and not elected by the jurors was viewed as improper. A jury selected by its president was considered sensitive to pressure from the man who had organized it.¹⁴

Those who launched the protest represented no particular school. Babinski protested but Gilles de la Tourette did not sign the petition. Some wondered why those who registered the appeal waited until the results of the competition were announced. Their advocate held that a protest made at the moment when the breach of protocol occurred would have antagonized the jury and jeopardized the candidates' chances.¹⁵

Admitting that the system was defective and that certain judges and professors had little thought except for the advancement of their students, the *Gazette des Hôpitaux* viewed the reason for protest as superficial.¹⁶ The real basis for protest was considered remote, reflecting long-standing cumulative grudges harbored by many candidates against the clique and against the favoritism that ruled the actions of the medical faculty. Some journals said that the successful candidates lacked

the meritorious scientific publications and scholarly abilities of some candidates who had failed, that selection should be based on scientific publications alone, and that the present system was unfair.

The method of voting was criticized also. No written scores were announced when each exercise was completed, although this was the practice in other competitions. At the end of the examination oral voting determined who passed and who failed.¹⁷ In later years the practice of noting grades was adopted.

Some believed that the physicians who protested had been poorly counseled or misled. It was the lay press, however, which bared many of the unpleasant realities.

According to the *Echo* of Paris, Cornil stated in his interview that he supported those who petitioned the government but did not instigate or sign their petition. He asserted that some of the successful candidates had received aid in preparing their written examinations. He also cited the rivalries which existed between the faculties of Paris and those of other French cities. He had heard about breaches of protocol in competitions other than that in medicine. He said that in one of the surgical examinations the envelopes bearing the examination papers were marked with candidates' numbers. This enabled the judge to know the identity of the candidates.

Bouchard admitted that he had discussed the problem of postponement with his colleagues and they had agreed. He denied taking advantage of his presidential role and of the extra vote which he held because of Sée's absence. Claiming himself to be the victim of an intrigue, he had had a friend who was present at the time of the interview discuss the real issues relating to the protest. The friend admitted that deep rivalry existed between Bouchard on one hand and Cornil and Charcot on the other. Bouchard, having become more powerful than Charcot, was able to manage the competition and to take the lion's share.

The press acknowledged Bouchard's academic achievements but accused him of carrying to the extreme his desire for importance and power.¹⁵ He was criticized for his lack of patriotism in volunteering to attend the International Congress of Medicine in Berlin when other prominent French physicians had declined. The intensely nationalistic Charcot had had nothing to do with medical meetings in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War. Since Bouchard had rendered valuable service to the French government, it was thought that he considered

himself to be powerful enough to manage the examination singlehanded.

Sée, now in the declining years of his career, had long been a controversial figure in French medicine. His interview with the lay press was described as hostile.¹⁵ Like Bouchard, he claimed to be the victim of a plot and said that during his illness deceitful statements about the competition had been inserted in a journal which he edited. He considered the examination equitable and honest. The unsuccessful candidates had eliminated themselves by poor performance in their last examinations. Since Sée had not been present during these hours, his comment on them was challenged.

At the time of Armand Trousseau's resignation from the Faculty of Medicine in 1866, Sée, with the support of the Empress Eugénie, was put forth as a candidate for Trousseau's chair.^{18, 19} Since he had never achieved the title of *agrégé*, he was opposed by the faculty. Political pressures placed on the faculty were sufficient to lessen their opposition and Sée was elected as Professor of *Materia Medica* and Therapeutics. Sée, an excellent and forceful clinician, was productive until his death in 1896. He was constantly aware of advances in medicine throughout Europe and he became noted for his initiation and popularization of various types of therapy. He advocated the use of iodides in the treatment of asthma and salicylates for rheumatic pain. He treated cardiac irregularities with strophanthin. He had had much contact with Bouchard and had served as a member of the jury when Bouchard had competed in the *agrégation*. Both were highly intelligent and austere and both were ever searching for recognition in academic and social spheres. Sée was aware of Bouchard's work in basic science and was able to incorporate Bouchard's theories and observations into his therapeutic investigations.

Sée's attitude toward Charcot and his possible role in the competition were cited in the press. At the start of the examination he was reported to have said "I have been named a member of the jury to contribute to the downfall of the power of Charcot and he will repay me by never voting for me at the Institute." Sée had remarked, "Do you wish to know the whole truth? We have had enough of hypnotism and its followers."¹⁵

Despite the support which the petitioners had received in the lay press and in some medical journals, Bourgeois, who, as Minister of Public Assistance, was responsible for the conduct of the competition,

rejected the petition and on the same day was reported to have left for Algeria.²¹

The rejected candidates carried their appeal to the Council of State and the issue was not resolved until two years later. In the interim the appointments of the five successful *agrégés* were formalized by the Minister of Public Assistance. This act was judged by some to prejudice the Council of State in favor of the results of the examination of 1892. The new *agrégés*, however, fearing a reversal of the results of the examination, retained their own attorney to plead their case. In November of 1894 the Council of State upheld the earlier decision; it ruled that the competition in fact had not started until the day after the postponement and that no breach of protocol had taken place.²² The five who protested were required to pay the court costs of the successful candidates.

Charcot died suddenly in 1893 and his chair was filled by Fulgence Raymond. Two years later another *agrégation* in medicine was held. New regulations were now drawn up to govern the formation and actions of the jury. A new jury was selected. Many who were unsuccessful in 1892 competed again. Two of those who had protested (Achard and Wurtz) were now successful. The other three named as *agrégés* were Gilles de la Tourette, Leon Henri Thoinot, and Fernand Vidal.²³ All had failed in 1892.

For several years afterward Babinski continued to hate Bouchard.²⁴ He never again competed for the *agrégation*, and he remained outside the mainstream of French academic medicine. Babinski later held that, being free of academic obligations, he was able to devote more time to his own research. It is doubtful that at La Pitié, where he later worked, his productivity would have been greater had he succeeded in the *agrégation*. Although he never became the linear successor of Charcot, Babinski remains in our memory and his name is evoked many times a day in neurological practice.

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